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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the work of Virginia Woolf, feminist instructors of college composition can help their students to develop their own voices by encouraging innovation and revision of mainstream discourses and ways of expression. If Woolf believed that women cannot escape the language of men, which not only constitutes the symbolic realm of phallocentric culture but also names the very same language within which women's subject positions are constructed, she also believed that new forms emerge from the old. Woolf argues that women can refashion the language of men to reflect women's material conditions, i.e., their bodies, their experiences, their symbolic positions, and their cultural spaces. While both men and women may use an elastic sentence, therefore, the two sexes may never occupy the same cultural, textual and/or psychological spaces. Moreover, within women's relation to language, particular women may occupy different spaces, in part because they have agency; they can shape themselves. Woolf's feminist theory of rhetoric can provide feminist composition teachers with a set of assumptions about reading/writing possibilities. Teachers should challenge themselves and their students: (1) to question whether they feel trapped in patriarchal languages; (2) to contemplate the idea of a "woman's sentence"; (3) to conceptualize their own Angel in the House and consider its impact on their writing; (4) to use four great teachers of women--poverty, chastity, derision, and freedom from unreal loyalties. (TB)

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(Un)Common Readers and Writers: Reading Virginia Woolf to Construct Feminist Composition Pedagogies

[This paper is extracted from a manuscript that I have completed entitled "Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition(s): Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich." The critical question that I explored in this study is: how may we challenge the genderblindness of traditional rhetorical theories and practices? This paper is one possible answer.]

In *The Common Reader* Virginia Woolf claims that we should read literature to "answer certain questions about ourselves." Today I want to read Woolf's writings to *ask* certain questions about rhetoric and composition studies. Specifically, I want to ask how Virginia Woolf's feminist theory of rhetoric may inform feminist composition pedagogies. But wait, you may be asking yourself, am I missing something? Did Virginia Woolf compose a theory of rhetoric? Well, not in the traditional sense. Histories of rhetoric do not invoke her name and composition textbooks do not incorporate her critiques of what it means to be a woman who writes . . . except perhaps as a boxed blue blurb on the lower left-hand side of a page. Indeed, from the site of rhetoric and composition studies, many scholar/teachers might wonder what exactly constitutes Woolf's contributions to our field. In this paper I will explore such questions. First, I will discuss Woolf's Anglo-American feminist theory of rhetoric, which I have extrapolated from (re)reading her writings about women, language, and culture. Second, I will argue that Woolf's feminist theory of rhetoric may indeed provide theoretical underpinnings for feminist pedagogies.

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Virginia Woolf's Anglo-American Feminist Theory of Rhetoric

By feminist theory of rhetoric, I mean discourse theories that employ feminism(s) as their lens of inquiry for determining in all types of discourse how language functions through individuals, contexts, and texts to construct meanings that influence public and private cultural spaces by moving individual subjects to personal and collective action and/or attitude. Because Woolf is explicitly concerned with Anglo-American women writers and feminist discourse, we may read her rhetorical concerns and weave them into an Anglo-American feminist theory of rhetoric. But because Woolf's theory has this decidedly Anglo-American focus, it provides *a*, not *the*, means of challenging the gender-blindness of more traditional rhetorical theories and practices. Although many rhetorical concerns compose Woolf's feminist theory of rhetoric, today I would like to focus on the interweavings of three: language function, style, and agency.

Language

Woolf's theory of language function appears in her 1920 essay entitled "Men and Women" in which she ponders the dilemma of Bathsheba Everdene in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd.* Bathsheba says: "I have the feelings of a woman but only the language of men" (195). To address Bathsheba's dilemma, Woolf offers women three rhetorical possibilities: (1) using conventional strategies that work, (2) rejecting conventional strategies that do not, and/or (3) constructing other strategies that are more functional for women (195). Woolf's three possibilities assume that women cannot escape the language of men, which not only constitutes the symbolic realm of phallogocentric culture but also names the very same language within which women's subject positions are constructed (Belsey 48-51; Stimpson xi-xx). By acknowledging that there is nowhere to stand outside this language, Woolf's strategies also assume that the new forms must emerge from the old: conventional theories and practices are viewed not as static but as mutable; newly conceptualized theories and practices, by implication, emerge so as to make the old ones unrecognizable.

In this way Woolf's strategies provide a means for theorizing our way beyond the formalism as well as the violent metaphors upon which phallogocentric rhetorical theory is sometimes based. Woolf's strategies also provide a means of theorizing our way beyond what Mary Ryder defines as the binary trap within feminist language theories, i.e., of being forced to identify either with women who are totally oppressed within language or with women who are deemed mad when they reject phallocentric language (530-31). Instead, Woolf's strategies imply that women can use the language of men to find ways of expressing the feelings of a woman, feelings both painful and pleasurable. And once such emotional desire is written into language, it signifies that the material conditions can/have changed sufficiently so that cultural change is possible. Woolf exemplies this weaving of the textual and the cultural when she parodies Plato by arguing that poetry (or language play) is indeed powerful enough to create a republic (qtd. in Marcus 16). Hence, Woolf urges women writers to play with language.

Style

But for Woolf, women's playing with the language of men does not mean writing in the style(s) of men. In *A Room of One's Own* she laments that the styles of women writers are often tangled in the weeds and briars of patriarchal language and logic (61); however, she also imagines a talented but fictional woman writer named Mary Carmichael who negotiates these weeds and briars by breaking the sentence and the sequence (81). By invoking Mary Carmichael's stylistic breaks, Woolf is calling for a revolution in style that will enable potentially talented women writers to write themselves into the foreground instead of being whisked away into the background with a wink, a laugh, and a tear (45). But what will spur such a revolution?

According to Woolf, strict imitation will not help. She cautions that great men writers provide little help for women writers, even if these men's texts are pleasurable to read, because women should not write like men (*AROO* 76, 88). Rather, Woolf argues that women's

styles should reflect women's material conditions, i.e., their bodies, their experiences, their symbolic positions, and their cultural spaces. That Jane Austen hid her manuscript from visitors is important to Woolf because these actions shaped Austen's sentences. That the novel of Mary Carmichael breaks both the sentence and the sequence of Austen's novels is also important to Woolf because such breaks in style and arrangement allow women's styles to differ not only from men's but from one another's (91).

Thus, if strict imitation isn't desirable for women writers, revisionary imitation is. Support for such a move can be found when Woolf praises Mary Carmichael's writing process for integrating new forms and new ideas into the old while maintaining the balance of the whole (*AROO* 85); Carmichael's move need not be read as maintaining the status quo but rather as continually converting the old into a style of one's own. Further support for revisionary imitation can be found in Woolf's review of "Dorothy Richardson," where she defines "a woman's sentence" as one whose elasticity enables a woman writer to describe her mind in ways that avoid pride and fear (191).

The implications of Woolf's claims about revisionary imitation are enormous. Because language is a shared social experience, women and men may both use an elastic sentence. But because women and men are positioned differently in relation to language, the two sexes may never occupy the same cultural, textual, and/or psychological spaces; moreover, within women's relation to language, particular women may occupy different spaces. It is this particularized function of a woman's sentence, not simply its structures, that finally determines a woman's style. Thanks to this particularity, Woolf's theory of style not only escapes the trap of biological and linguistic essentialism and calls generalized writing rules into question, but it also constructs possible spaces for a woman's agency.

Agency

In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf likens a writing subject's attaining new knowledge to a bowl's being constantly (re)filled with water (64). Every new idea, behavior, and person encountered changes the level and the motion of the water. In this way, the present and past merge, and an individual retains an identity (the bowl) while being in constant flux (the water) (Schulkind 13-14). This combination of continuity and change is central to Woolf's concept of author. It assumes that individual subjects are not merely essentialist selves (the bowl), not simply discursive positions (the flow of water), but evolving agents who may at times employ language for their own purposes. This position is demonstrated by Woolf's praise of Aphra Behn and her invocation of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*. But the invoked Judith Shakespeare does not exist, or become an active agent, all on her own. Instead women must work for her, just as Aphra Behn did, writing so as to change the material conditions so that Ms. Shakespeare can emerge. Thus Woolf provides a means of theorizing a heteroglossic agency within textual, cultural, and psychological structures, an agency that may take different forms in men and women, an agency that may emerge differently in different women, an agency in which women writing make women writers possible.

But how do women writers participate in the making of meaning? In "Craftsmanship" Woolf claims that the troubled connections between an historical writer's life and her words can be broken only at death; however, in *A Room of One's Own* she rejects the author's state of mind as the sole or even the best determinate of meaning (248). By doubling the importance of an historical author with the importance of an open text, Woolf posits the author as an active agent who haunts her texts within history and culture but who cannot control their receptions.

Yet in "Professions for Women" Woolf warns that a woman writer faces two particular obstacles to becoming an active agent. The first is the "Angel in the House" (62). Woolf describes the effect of the Angel on her own writing process as follows: "Directly, she slipped behind me and whispered: 'My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that

has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure" (59). Thus, the Angel affects Woolf's decisions about what topics to examine, what authors to review, what tone to adopt, what style to imitate, what claims to make, etc. Although Woolf claims some success with killing this Angel later in life, she makes no such claim about the second obstacle facing a woman writer: i.e, telling the truth about her body ("62). Not surprisingly, Woolf tells the truth about her body mostly in private writings: e.g., her diaries hint at her sexual orientation; and her posthumously published *Moments of Being* names her step-brother George as a perpetrator of incest and herself as a survivor.

Killing the Angel in the House and telling the truth about her body make a woman's authoring within the language of men easier said than done. Woolf demonstrates this difficulty when analyzing her own writing process in "A Sketch of the Past." Her impluse to write, she says, occurs like "a blow," which:

> is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what. (71)

Although grounded in a violent metaphor, Woolf's impulse to write provides a means of turning blows into positive action, into discovering and writing new ideas. The author's making a thing "real" and "whole" by "putting it into words" need not be read as belief in Platonic metaphysics or New Critical critiques. Instead it may be read as the basis for a constructionist theory in which the author continuously constructs a framework that provides her a sense of order and

power. But gaining this order and power need not mean conforming to patriarchal assumptions and conclusions; rather it may mean gaining power through an order that makes sense to the author, sense that emerges when she weaves her own experiences, body, emotions,[1] and logic into a text. Such a process, I argue, has implications for feminist composition pedagogies.

Pedagogical Implications

Virginia Woolf describes patriarchal pedagogy in *A Room of One's Own*: "it is necessary," she says, "for one side to beat another side, and of the utmost importance to walk up a platform and receive from the hands of the Headmaster himself a highly ornamental pot" (106).[2] This description of pots, Headmasters, and sides pinpoints patriarchal power dynamics. The pot presented by the Headmaster functions as public validation of a student's accomplishments; private validation, though celebrated in our culture's most valued philosophical and theological texts, is not publicly rewarded within this system. The term *Headmaster* is telling in itself, reducing knowledge to that which is known in the head and implying that learning is mastery; hence, the head masters the body as well as its surroundings and creates an abstraction whose spider web's connection to material things is severed. Moreover, where there are sides, there are winners and losers; there are also those who are not even allowed to participate in the game. As Woolf argues in *Three Guineas*, this educational logic reflects and reinforces the gender-blindness of Western mastery dynamics that have been perpetuated since long before the age of Creon (141). She further argues that this logic and its accompanying rhetoric threaten to destroy us all.

Although Woolf bemoans women's education in *A Room of One's Own*, she outlines her hope for it in *Three Guineas*. Specifically, she advises administrators of women's colleges to take advantage of their positions as "young and poor" and be "adventurous"--all in the hopes of creating new educational structures in which to unweave the insidious interweavings of sexism, capitalism, and fascism that she believes lead inevitably to war (33). According to Woolf, the

buildings of women's colleges should be constructed "of some cheap, easily combustible material which does not hoard dust and perpetuate traditions" (33). Their curricula should include only that which can be easily taught and learned by the poor: e.g., "the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people's lives and minds, and the little arts of talk, of dress, of cookery that are allied with them" (34). The goals of women's colleges should foster holistic, not specialized, knowledge--a knoweldge that combines the powers of mind and body (34). Their teachers should be "drawn from the good livers as well as from the good thinkers" (34). And finally, their theoretical grounding should be in the four great teachers of women: one, poverty (a woman should earn only enough money to live on); two, chastity (a woman should not sell her mind for money); three, derision (a woman should recognize that ridicule is preferable to token praise); and four, freedom from unreal loyalties(79).[3] Such a definition of feminist pedagogy foregrounds the intersubjectivity of students, teachers, and institutions, implying an interconnectedness of pedagogical strategies and topics, of education and life.

Woolf's feminist theory of rhetoric and definitions of feminist pedagogy do not establish a particular syllabus that will guarantee a feminist composition classroom; such a syllabus, I'm afraid, cannot exist. What Woolf's feminst theory of rhetoric can do, however, is provide feminist composition teachers with a set of assumptions about reading/writing possibilities. With these assumptions, we may challenge our students and ourselves to make the following moves:

> (1) to question whether or not like Bathsheba Everdene we feel trapped within patriarchal languages, logics, and rhetorics; and to wonder like the narrator in *A Room of One's Own* whether it is worse to be locked in or locked out (24);
>
> (2) to employ Woolf's language imperative--i.e., to try strategies that work, to discard those that do not, and/or to create those that may--as *topoi* for reading

and writing; then to critique this imperative's effectiveness as an answer to Bathsheba's dilemma and, perhaps, to ours ("Men and Women" 195);

(3) to contemplate the concept of "a woman's sentence," determining whether or not we believe it exists and how we think it could (not) be employed ("Dorothy Richardson" 191);

(4) to conceptualize our own Angel in the House and consider its impact on our writing; or alternatively, to argue that we have no Angel and consider the impact of this fact on our writing ("Professions for Women" 58-60);

(5) to analyze our own sentences and sequences to become more aware of our own stylistic practices; then to analyze these stylistic practices in terms of our own gendered positions within our complex social matrix (*AROO* 81);

(6) to practice strict imitation and revisionary imitation, comparing them to determine which, if either, is helpful in improving our understanding of language function or of our own writing processes (*AROO*76, 88; *The Diary of V.W.* 3.119);

(7) to use the four great teachers of women--poverty, chastity, derision, and freedom from unreal loyalties--as *topoi* to analyze assigned texts and to generate our own texts (*TG* 79);

(8) to recount experiences that we have made real by putting them into words and to speculate about the power of this function of language ("A Sketch of the Past" 71).

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf's narrator tells the barrister that women can best change the world by refusing old words and old methods and by creating new ones instead (143). Virginia Woolf's feminist theory of rhetoric, I argue, is one such new word, one such new method. If we can employ its pedagogical assumptions in our classroom activities--e.g., in designing

assignments, teaching invention and style, and responding to papers--then perhaps we can help our students and ourselves to conceptualize and articulate our complicated subject positions within our complex social matrix; that is, perhaps we can all become more aware of how socially constructed categories of gender intersect with socially construsted categories of race, geography, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, etc. If we can all learn to identify and to respect the diversity among and within these positions, then as feminist composition teachers we will have taken important steps toward helping our students, and ourselves, not only *answer* but also *ask* certain questions about ourselves. In doing so, we will all have moved toward becoming (un)common readers and writers.

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